Annotated Bibliography: A Non-Binary Pedagogy: Queer Theory in Teaching Composition

**Introduction**

The application of queer theory—a critical framework that focuses on the role of gender and sexuality norms in maintaining oppressive power structures—to pedagogy has met a resurgence in recent years after stalling somewhat in the early 2000s. To “queer” something is to celebrate the messiness and complexity of individual identity; wrestle with questions of boundaries, binaries, and social norms; and find joy in a constant process of dismantling and recreating the self. All of these actions are particularly relevant to rhetoric as a discipline, and thus, a queer pedagogical ideology would seem to be a natural fit for composition teachers to consider and implement in their English classrooms.

The following sources deal with queer pedagogy as a process of queering teacher education itself, but included with the annotations are some thoughts on how the principles can be more specifically applied to the classroom and to the teaching of composition. These sources have informed the definition of queerness given above; they share a common thread of viewing queerness as bound up in language, in the expressive ability to play with meaning in order to disrupt, obscure, and reinvent the coercive standards which repress not only LGBTQ+ people, but everyone in a heteronormative society. As teachers, the primary challenge of education is to balance the authority given by the institution (which prefers and reinforces normative standards by nature) with giving students the freedom, space, encouragement, and resources to truly explore and express themselves. Greteman, Meyer, Miller, and Whitlock all provide some small contribution to this perpetual discourse through the frame of queering pedagogy—of shattering the binaries, and taking joy in the messy, complicated, contradictory, nonlinear process of identity creation and recreation.

Greteman, Adam J. “On Reading Practices: Where Pragmatism and Queer Meet.” *Sexualities*

*and Gender in Education: Towards Queer Thriving,* Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, pp. 37-

65.

**Summary**

While the entire book is worth reading, the second chapter is particularly relevant to the teaching of composition. Greteman first discusses the way that the process of reading “impacts how we come to understand our corporeal realities” (41) and portrays education as a process of continual reshaping of one’s understanding of the world and oneself. He draws on both queer theory and pragmatism to describe the frameworks of *paranoid* versus *reparative* reading—readings that expose oppression and injustice in the present, and readings that seek to construct a potential future. Both have their place; both are, at their best, a form of engagement with texts that seeks to do justice to the lived experiences that “disrupt” (52) standard interpretations of them.

**Pedagogical Applications**

While most of the article is more high-level theory, which will require some thought to put into practice, he does provide an intriguing insight: queer theory is marked by “inventive playfulness that has serious consequences” (58). The classroom setting, usually dedicated to instilling a normative way of using language, can instead become a place where students learn to use “plays on language and expanding the use of language beyond the literal” (60) to engage with both other texts and their own writing. This suggests the possibility of putting more emphasis on students’ freedom of expression as rhetors, and focusing the teaching of rhetoric on experimentation-- what effects *can* be created using language, rather than being told which effects to aim for and which methods one *should* use to create them.

*Keywords: reading practices, literacy, interpretation, writing styles*

Meyer, Elizabeth J. “‘But I’m Not Gay’: What Straight Teachers Need to Know About Queer

Theory.” *Queering Straight Teachers: Discourse and Identity in Education*, ed. Nelson

M. Rodriguez and William F. Pinar, New York: Peter Lang, 2007, pp. 15-32.

**Summary**

The first chapter in its book, this article is a good introduction to the basics of queer theory and how it is being used to critique and change the process of education. It begins with important concepts within queer theory—the use of heterosexual gender roles in reinforcing existing power structures; Judith Butler’s framework of gender as a social performance of identity; and the way that gendered harassment is used to punish those who do not sufficiently conform to societal norms. Meyer then sketches the ways in which educators can and do either tacitly endorse heterosexism in their role as an authority figure, or apply queer and other liberatory critical frameworks as lenses to enact “education as the path to achieving a truly equitable and just society” (25).

**Pedagogical Applications**

Meyer gives specific suggestions and notes challenges for educators in incorporating an awareness of queer theory into their classrooms. She suggests that fundamentally, queerness “seeks to … disrupt and challenge traditional modes of thought and, by standing outside them, examine and dismantle them” (26); then she explicitly links this to the ideal of the teaching process. She urges teachers to create spaces where students can challenge traditional binaries, and in general to engage with conversations that have historically been silenced. This itself requires breaking down the teacher/student binary, and viewing learning as a process of exploration rather than attaching knowledge to authority and certainty.

*Keywords: queer theory, heteronormativity, discrimination, educational institutions*

Miller, Janet L. “Autobiography as a Queer Curriculum Practice.” *Queer Theory in Education,*

ed. William F. Pinar. 1998. Lawrence Erlbaum, 2009, pp. 301-308.

**Summary**

This short essay cuts straight to the chase: Miller discusses the current uses of autobiography in educational research and the ways that it reinforces ideas about what an identity “should” be: conscious, neat, progressing from ignorance to enlightenment; binary, un-nuanced, and conclusive. She asks, “When only certain stories can be told in certain ways and for certain reasons... what ‘tangles of implication’ are refused or ignored?” (305) She then proposes that autobiography can instead be queered, and used to explore the messiness of identity, the way desire and fear play into our conceptions and presentations of ourselves and others, and the ways we as writers can make the natural and familiar *un*natural and *un*familiar.

**Pedagogical Applications**

Miller is focusing on autobiography as a tool for teacher education and reflection specifically. Her suggestions can be used as-is for personal reflection and development of curricula, classroom strategies, and teaching goals. However, when considering the teaching of composition specifically, the principles of personal narrative and expression of identity that she describes can also be worked into a composition classroom. Perhaps the underlying theory should not be explained explicitly to 1010 students, but it *can* be kept in mind while designing writing assignments, so that the class becomes a space where students are encouraged and enabled to break out of traditional patterns of story-making and identity construction, and can play with expressing themselves more complexly.

*Keywords: teacher education, composition genres, autobiography, identity, narrative structure*

Whitlock, Reta Ugena. “Getting Queer: Teacher Education, Gender Studies, and the Cross-

Disciplinary Quest for Queer Pedagogies.” *Issues in Teacher Education*, vol. 19, no. 2,

2010, pp. 81-104.

**Summary**

Whitlock takes the suggestions of Janet Miller and creates an autobiographical half-narrative half-research-report that grapples with what she terms the difference between “queer” and “gay/LGBT” pedagogy. To “queer” a classroom, she says, must be a verb—an active process—and an elusive one. She critiques previous and current applications of queer theory to teaching and teacher education, framing them as statements of intent rather than an actual methodology, and discusses the issues with creating a “queer” methodology of teaching, which she boils down to: queerness is about rejecting normativity and shattering binaries; queer thus cannot be normalized and still remain queer.

**Pedagogical Applications**

Whitlock’s paper does not provide any easy answers, but it does provide a wealth of examples of how she personally has worked—with varying success—to queer her teaching and her classroom. The paper itself also serves as a wonderfully instructive example of the autobiography as queer curriculum that Miller (1998) proposed.

*Keywords: gender studies, teacher education, discrimination, identity, interdisciplinary teaching*